

**Submission
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PREVENTION OF YOUTH SUICIDE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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headspace School Support

The impact of youth suicide is immediate and traumatic for those affected by it – for the friends or family of the individual especially, but also for the broader community. People bereaved by suicide frequently experience slower recovery than those bereaved by other types of death, and may struggle with understanding the death, guilt, blame for not preventing the death, feelings of rejection, and abandonment, anger towards the deceased and complicated grief. The extent to which the bereaved cope with these factors is strongly influenced by the immediate and ongoing response to the death and the support available.

This is particularly important in a school context, where the risk of subsequent student deaths after a suicide escalates – a phenomenon known as **suicide contagion**. Contagion is a key issue for young people in school settings. Adolescent peers of people who have **attempted suicide** or people who have died by suicide have reported significantly more suicide-related behaviour than those students who have not been exposed to the suicidal act of a peer.

It can be difficult for schools to know how to respond effectively to a suicide and minimise the emotional and operational impact of the death on the school community. In these circumstances, schools need clear, practical and reliable guidance and support to respond to the death, prevent subsequent deaths and aid in the recovery of the school community. **Postvention**, an intervention conducted after a suicide, is specifically designed to meet these needs. In a school setting, postvention aims to prevent further suicides in an affected school community, by reducing the impact of the initial suicide on the community.

In 2011, **headspace** School Support became the first service in the world to offer a postvention service to schools affected by suicide. Funded by the Australian Government Department of Health, **headspace** School Support offers immediate and ongoing services to schools to reduce the impact of suicide on school communities to ultimately reduce the rates of suicide among Australian secondary school students.

headspace School Support works with schools communities to prepare for, respond to and recovery from suicide. We do this cross three phases:

- Postvention planning
- Response
- Recovery

Postvention planning is the planning, implementation and review of strategies and processes to ensure effective recovery after suicide. This includes measures to ensure that, should a suicide occur, relevant staff, resources and services are capable of coping with the effects. Activities include



planning, preparation of processes and structures, staff training and development, and links with relevant agencies and personnel.

During Response and Recovery work **headspace** School Support tailors a range of services to the needs of individual schools, based on an assessment of their presenting problem(s), physical location, size, existing support structures and policies and their links to local services. The services provided may include improving the capacity of school staff to manage issues related to suicide – through the provision of information and consultation and training and policy development.

headspace School Support responds to notification within 24hours and if requested attempts to provide face to face support as soon as possible. Services are also delivered via phone and/or email, by multidisciplinary (allied health or education) state and territory-based **headspace** School Support staff. In situations where multiple suicides or attempts have occurred in a region, planning and response may involve a number of schools or the community.

headspace School Support works collaboratively with NSW Department of Education, Department of Health, Primary Health Networks, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Non-Government Organisations and other key stakeholders in the mental health sector including Beyond Blue, Lifeline and Black Dog Institute. In NSW, **headspace** School Support has partnered with Department of Education, Catholic Diocese and Independent schools to increase their capacity to respond to the impact of suicide by a coordinated system wide implementation of postvention plans and professional learning. This embedding of plans and knowledge has enabled a strengthening of relationships.

Unfortunately there are communities in NSW who have/are experiencing clusters of suicides and suicide attempts. **headspace** School Support has been involved in supporting many of these communities. In partnership with Primary Health Networks, Local Health Districts, local and state services, government representatives, Good Grief and NRL State of Mind Program, we have been able to introduce evidence based communication protocols and response coordination in an effort to mitigate further risk and suicide deaths. **headspace** School Support also partners with Standby Response Service, National Indigenous Critical Response Service and MindFrame to support the needs of these communities and help them with their recovery. A project partnership with Facebook has also benefitted many communities through the use of geo-targeted help seeking advertisements.

Through our experience of working directly with NSW communities impacted by 180 suicide deaths and 44 suicide attempts (2012- 2017), **headspace** School Support has been able to develop evidence and knowledge and evaluate and build our capacity for working with emergent contagion and high levels of exposure. **headspace** School Support in NSW has worked directly with 577 schools and provided 3900 occasions of service to these school communities. We are actively working with national and international experts in this field to contribute to the evidence base and areas of concern. **headspace** School Support contributes to state, national and international conversations about suicide and provides commentary and guidance on issues of concern for young people and their communities.